

The great Eurozone road-kill

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When you cross a street, and there is a car charging towards you, there is always this dilemma: do I step back or do I continue crossing? The actual choice is of course yours, but as any good student of social anthropology would tell you, what is the sensible strategy depends on the prevailing culture and social norms of the particular crossing. If you are in Italy, you should better step back and wait. If you are in Germany, you wouldn't even have entered the road. If you are in Greece, all you have to do is ensure that you don't visibly make eye-contact with the driver: if you do, her reaction will be something like "well, he saw me, so he'd better get his bum off the road"; if you don't, then she is more likely to think along the lines of "has he seen me? I'd better slow down – I don't want to have to pay for that idiot". Instead, if you are in the UK, establishing eye-contact is all you need to do: doing so, makes the driver think "that bloody pedestrian, he saw me but still wants to cross; I have to slow down"; failing to do so invites the driver to a challenge: "it is inappropriate to be crossing a road without checking the traffic first; I think I should accelerate, if anything, simply to make a point".

It seems to me that this is exactly the situation with the Greek crisis (the Eurozone crisis, some would say – well, you are free to choose). Greece is like a pedestrian standing in front of a dangerous crossing. On the other side there are nice shops and much to do, so the pedestrian aspires to crossing the road – even if it is tempting to just sit back and relax, and despite the dangers. But he needs to ensure that he reaches the other side safe and sound. How can he do it? Simple! What he needs to do is exactly what any pedestrian has to do at a crossing: negotiate the traffic. To do so, he has to follow the rules and norms of road behaviour that apply at the crossing. And this is the problem.

Coming charging down the road, is a manic driver that loves taking risks and speculating – let's call him Mr Markets. Before him, is a rules-loving German driver, who of course has no interest in causing an accident. Seeing the Greek pedestrian in the middle of the road, he is looking for some eye-contact to ensure the pedestrian sees him. He can decelerate, but he doesn't want to break too hard, or to come to a still – worrying about the charging Mr Markets behind him and wanting to adhere to the rules. On the other hand, the Greek pedestrian shows little appreciation of all this and wants to stick to his own road behaviour. "They can see me crossing", he thinks, "so I might as well take my time – after all, I am exhausted! No way will they run me over: who would want to have a fatal accident on their conscience – let alone picking up the hospital bill and perhaps also a conviction in a court – just for the sake of sticking to some silly rules!" (In fact, some version of the Greek pedestrian would go even further: "Well, that car may kill me, but the blame will be with the driver that didn't stop; how can you blame a pedestrian for not walking fast enough at a crossing? Not to mention that this driver owes me some hefty compensation from a past 'accident'...")

And so the collision becomes seemingly inevitable. Incidentally, a British bystander may also be somewhere around there – perhaps just a few yards away. She does nothing to prevent the developing accident, but already prepares the testimony she will give at the court: "Told you so; can't have a free crossing on a highway and let slow-paced pedestrians cross at will. Your road rules don't work – you should never mix high-speed cars with slow paced pedestrians. Yes, your Honour, it is indeed the German driver that killed the Greek pedestrian; but it is the Franco-German architect, who designed this road, that is to blame here."

You can follow the logic. The Franco-German architect will counter-argue that the road was supposed to make everybody better off, by improving accessibility and providing 'freedom of movement' for all; it was supposed to educate, to harmonise, to bring everybody together. And the analogy goes on.

But while everybody is in their own way right, the German car keeps firmly on its path, Mr Markets keeps charging fast, and the Greek pedestrian keeps strolling on the crossing. What was meant to be a simple task of negotiating a safe crossing 'to the other side', is becoming a self-defeating path-dependence, a trap for a deadly accident – that was never meant to happen. Quite tragically, there is no 'right and wrong' here. Whose fault it is, depends on what

you take as your starting point. The pedestrian should have never entered the high-speed road without taking care; Mr Markets should have never been allowed to go wild on the road; the conservative driver should have never disregarded Mr Markets and should have slowed down earlier; the architects of the road should have never built such a road without adding safe crossings or road-signs; and the bystander should have never let herself become witness to a preventable accident.

But while the blame can be shifted to whomever one may want, the fact of the matter is that the Greek pedestrian is walking slowly but surely towards a painful death. He can still negotiate the traffic. But to do so, he has to change his attitude; he has to change his road behaviour. He has to look the German driver in the eye and find an understanding – at these last few seconds before the fatal accident – of how they will manage not to bump into each other. If he continues to ignore the rules of the road, if he keeps on strolling along the crossing carelessly, wondering about with his eyes shut and at his own pace, he will simply be run over – down dead.

But perhaps at the very last second the Greek pedestrian will come to his senses. It may be too late to make it to the other side, but perhaps he will manage to jump back to his side of the road, escaping the high-speed accident with a few – or maybe not so few – scars and some broken bones. He may then feel morally justified to blame the German driver (and Mr Markets of course) for causing the accident; for never giving him the time to cross the road. Quite appropriately, he will have all the time he wants to do that – and to reflect over and over again on the accident. Stuck on the wrong side of the road, badly scarred for life, he will have all the time he wants to look across, pondering on ‘what could have been’ had he managed to find a way to cross. A story to tell, to his children and to his children’s children – forever stuck on his side of the road, forever reflecting on what might have been...